

IPEC Country Profile : El Salvador

Child labour in El Salvador

Of El Salvador's 6.2 million inhabitants, 2.2 million, or 35 percent, are under the age of 18. Of these children, an estimated 440,000¹ work.

Some 683,000, or 11 percent of the population, are aged 10 through 14. Of this age group, roughly 60,000 provide a least part of the necessary income for their families' survival².

These alarming figures on child labour are largely attributable to the legacy of social and economic hardship caused by the 12-year civil war that spanned the 1980's. The destruction of social and economic infrastructure during this period greatly exacerbated poverty, particularly in rural areas. Although fighting ended in 1992, the number of working children has steadily increased during the last decade. In many cases, sending children to work has been a survival strategy adopted by the numerous poor households that were left with only one parent. It is estimated that 20 percent of the income of poor families in El Salvador is the result of child labour.

Approximately two-thirds of all working children are concentrated in rural areas where they are mainly involved in agriculture and related activities. In the agricultural sector, child labour is a particular problem in the growing and processing of sugarcane and coffee. Child labour is also a serious concern in non-agricultural sectors, including: fishing and shellfish harvesting; scavenging in garbage dumpsites; the making of fireworks; commercial sexual exploitation; and informal activities in urban areas, such as drug trafficking, small-scale street vending and other services.

Progress during the post-conflict period in the reconstruction of infrastructure and the re-establishment of basic social services, such as education, was set back by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the two successive earthquakes of January and February 2001. All three of these natural disasters left many families homeless (150,000 homes destroyed by the recent earthquakes alone) and many additional children vulnerable to becoming child labourers.

IPEC in El Salvador

A Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of El Salvador and the ILO was signed in 1996. At this time, the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) officially began operations with the following clear objectives:

- to mobilize and sensitise government institutions and civil society;

¹ "Youth in situations of Social Exclusion", Study sponsored by the Enterprise Foundation for Educational Development (Fundación Empresarial para el Desarrollo Educativo - FEPADE) 1998

² Multiple Use Household Survey 1999, Ministry of the Economy, Government of El Salvador (table D08)

- to involve these actors in the creation of a national strategy to eradicate child labour through their participation on a national commission formed for this purpose; and
- to develop direct action programmes to eradicate and prevent child labour.

Since then, numerous activities to mobilize government and social actors against child labour have been carried out and direct action programmes to withdraw and rehabilitate victims of child labour implemented. For example, recent IPEC-sponsored action programmes have successfully:

- removed 175 children from shellfish (“*curiles*”) harvesting on the Island of Espiritu Santo, near Usulután;
- removed or protected 130 working or at-risk children from garbage scavenging in a dumpsite in Santa Ana Municipality in the northwest of the country;
- withdrawn or prevented from working some 250 children in vending and related activities in the market of Santa Ana Municipality;
- targeted some 2000 working or at-risk children in the coffee sector in the municipalities of Ataco and Juayúa; and
- targeted some 2500 working or at-risk children involved in the production of fireworks in the municipalities of Apopa, Cuscatancingo, Delgado, and Mejicanos.

To improve data on child labour in El Salvador, a child labour module designed by IPEC’s statistical unit, SIMPOC, has been included in the government’s Multiple Purpose Household Survey of 2001.

IPEC National Partners: Governments Agencies, Organizations and Donors

Participating government agencies

Minsitry of Labor and Social Security
 Ministry of Education Ministry of Health
 Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock
 National Secretary of the Family Salvadorean Institute for Minors Protection
 Salvadorian Institute of Professional Training Salvadorian Coffee Council

Participating employers’ and workers’ organizations

National Private Enterprise Association
 Trade Union Federations represented at the Superior Council of Labour.

Participating non-governmental organizations

Women’s Entreprise Organization (OEF)
 Salvadorian Association for Rural Welfare (ASAPROSAR)
 Salvadorian Foundation for Development
 Entreprise Foundation for Social Action Sugar Cane Foundation

Government donors

Spain
United Kingdom
United States of America

Other donors

Empresa: AES CLESA

Government policy towards child labour

The Constitution of El Salvador (1983) defines the minimum age and conditions under which children under the age of 18 are permitted to work. Children under 14 or those not having finished basic education are prohibited from working except in extreme cases where it is necessary for the subsistence of the family, and only if it does not interfere with basic education. All work at night and any work that is hazardous or poses health risks and are prohibited under the age of 18. The Labour Code (1972) defines further the types of labour acceptable for minors and requires that medical examinations of working minors be free and compulsory.

As in the case of many countries with child labour problems, in El Salvador the laws and regulations concerning child work are widely disregarded by poverty-stricken families and unscrupulous employers, even when the work is hazardous and clearly forbidden by law.

Since 1992, the year of the Chapultepec Peace Agreement, The Government of El Salvador has enacted a number of important legal reforms and policy measures to more directly address the problem of child labour, better enforce and implement existing laws, and improve access to education.

- In 1993 a National Policy on Minors was formulated, which spells out the responsibilities and obligations of the family, community and state with regard to children, including child labour.
- In that same year, two institutions were created to protect children's rights: the Salvadorian Institute for the Protection of Minors (1993), one of whose functions has been to implement policies and programmes to eradicate child labour, and the National Secretary for the Family as the entity responsible for overseeing policy.
- A major national educational reform programme is currently underway with the support of the World Bank, The Inter-American Development Bank and UNICEF to broaden the accessibility to and improve the quality of basic and secondary education, particularly in rural areas.

Having already ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the government ratified Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for employment in 1996 and Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour in 2000. In fact, since 1995 the Government of El Salvador has ratified 18 ILO conventions, attesting to its firm commitment for respect of basic labour rights for its workforce.

Factors contributing to child labour in El Salvador

Extreme Poverty

In El Salvador, about 50 percent of the total population and about 60 percent of the rural population live below the poverty line. About 19 percent of all households are considered to be extremely poor, or without the means to cover basic food requirements³. El Salvador ranks 104th out of 174 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index (2000).

Acute poverty generally obliges children from affected households to contribute to family income from a very young age. This obligation to work makes it highly unlikely that these children will obtain a level of education that would allow them to break the vicious circle of poverty.

Notwithstanding the numerous economic reforms and improved economic indicators in the last decade, rural poverty has declined at a much slower rate than in urban areas. The rural population comprises about 54 percent of the total population and rural economy remains heavily based on traditional subsistence farming. About 80 percent of all agricultural producers work farms of less than 3 hectares.

El Salvador, like many Latin American countries, has a non-agricultural sector that is dominated by small businesses. Some 95 percent of all businesses have less than five employees, indicating that the majority of these enterprises are family-based and provide subsistence income.

Socio-economic indicators	1990	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Population (millions)	5.1	5.7	5.8	5.9	6.1	6.2
Population growth	1.8	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.1
Life expectancy at birth				69.4	69.5	
Adult illiteracy – female (% of total)	30.8	27	26.2	25.6	25	24.4
Adult illiteracy – male (% of total)	23.8	20.7	20.1	19.7	19.2	18.7
Real GDP growth (%)	4.8	6.4	1.8	4.1	3.2	2.0
Agriculture, value added (% GDP)	17.1	13.4	12.9	13.3	12.0	10.4

Sources: World Bank, World Development Indicators

Rural-Urban Migration

Rural-urban migration has increased substantially in the last decade. According the latest figures of the Salvadoran Ministry of the Economy, the

³ Documento de propuesta para estudio de las condiciones socioeconómicas que influyen en el trabajo infantil en El Salvador, preparado por FUSADES para IPEC

percentage of the population living in urban areas rose to 58 percent by 1999, compared with 50 percent in 1992. This rapid growth has strained the capacity of the central government and municipalities to provide basic services, including housing. Many migrants thus settle in substandard housing in environmentally unstable areas (unstable ground, hillsides, etc).

The lack of jobs in the formal economy that awaits migrants in the urban areas means that they must resort to poorly paid informal sector employment. Indeed, such families often must rely on the income of children to acquire basic needs. Unfortunately, the recent earthquakes have exacerbated rural poverty and the problem of rural-urban migration.

Cultural factors

Salvadorians value work, and giving children responsibility from an early age is viewed positively. At present, there is a very low level of awareness among the general population of the dangers and harmful long-term consequences of child labour for children and society.

While primary education is compulsory and free, for many poor families, it is simply a much lower priority than their children's work. For them, learning to work at a young age is the only way to ensure that basic needs can be met.

Sectors associated with the worst forms of child labour

IPEC-sponsored Rapid Assessment Surveys have been completed or are currently underway in the following sectors to measure the magnitude and identify the context of the worst forms of child labour.

- **Commercial sexual exploitation**

According to the recent Rapid Assessment Survey, about 80 percent of child victims of prostitution in El Salvador are girls from 10 to 18 years of age. The metropolitan area of San Salvador is the principal centre for this activity. It was also noted that a considerable number of these children abuse drugs and were exposed to this habit in their current environment. While family poverty is an important factor that pushes children into prostitution, gender discrimination in Salvadoran society also makes young girls particularly vulnerable.

- **Fishing**

Thousands of children, both girls and boys, are involved in fishing, mainly in small-scale family or private businesses. The risks to the safety and health of these children can be very serious and even life threatening, depending on the type of fishing they do. These hazards include drowning, injury from knives or cutting instruments, exposure to the sun for more than six hours a day, accidents from the handling of explosives (illegal fishing), and contamination by micro organisms associated with this environment. It is common to find children with badly sun-damaged skin, fungus infections covering their feet and hands or even amputated members. Many of these children also abuse amphetamines to keep them awake during night shifts and regularly smoke tobacco (mostly cigars) to help repel mosquitoes.

The fishing sector also includes the hundreds of children who spend long hours wading in mosquito-infested mangrove swamps in search of *curiles* (small mollusks) buried in the mud. For them, the continual contact with mud and stagnant water and the presence of insects and snakes pose additional risks.

The long, exhausting and irregular hours associated with fishing translate directly into low school attendance. As most fishing in El Salvador depends on ocean tides and often requires night work, children involved in this activity frequently abandon school.

- **Fireworks**

IPEC estimates that there are over 2,000 boys and girls in various areas of El Salvador risking their safety and their lives in the extremely hazardous production of fireworks. Children are involved in activities ranging from mixing and packing the gunpowder and other chemicals to putting in the wick. The risks are obvious and enormous: severe injuries, burns and death from accidental explosions; chemical burns; and cuts from sharp instruments used in the manufacturing process.

- **Scavenging in garbage dumpsites**

Scavenging in garbage dumpsites for items that can be resold – such as glass, plastic bottles and metal cans -- clearly fulfils the base conditions of a worst form of child labour. The risks to the health and safety of children are great and many: lacerations from broken glass and jagged pieces of metal; infections and disease from unsanitary conditions; serious and sometimes fatal accidents involving the garbage trucks and machines that roll over the garbage to compact it.

- **Sugarcane industry**

Ninety-nine percent of all children working in sugarcane are involved in the dangerous activities of cutting or scraping canes. These child labourers risk cuts and mutilation due to accidents with the sharp cutting tools or farm machinery as well as injuries related to the sharp edges of the canes and the carrying of heavy loads. They are also exposed to poisons from the application of insecticides, fungicides and fertilizers, and have an increased risk of respiratory and lung diseases. Sugarcane workers must also often endure insects and snakebites and long hours in heat and humidity.

The sugarcane season lasts for about five months from mid-November. While the first three months coincide with the school holiday period, the last two overlap the beginning of the school year. This means that children who work for the entire season miss the first two months of the school year and often either lose a year or drop out altogether.

El Salvador's Time-Bound Programme

The Government of El Salvador confirmed its strong commitment towards eliminating child labour in May 2000 by offering to become the first country in the Western Hemisphere to develop and implement a time-bound approach for the eradication of the worst forms of child labour. As a manifestation of its commitment and in preparation for this new programme, the Ministry of Labour of El Salvador has restructured the National Commission on Child Labour and is proceeding with the selection and installation of new members. This Commission will be charged with overseeing the fulfilment of the government's commitments on eradicating child labour, including wide-scale social mobilization and the design, implementation of the national strategy against child labour incorporating the Time-Bound Programme.

Other preparatory activities being undertaken or planned include:

- six Rapid Assessment Surveys to give a better overall picture of the child labour situation and orient future direct action programmes;
- studies on the current context of child labour with regard to poverty, education and legislation;
- a national roundtable comprising government and civil society stakeholders to establish the priority worst forms of child labour for the Time-Bound Programme;
- coordination with other agencies (USAID) and international organizations (UNICEF, IADB, IBRD, etc.) which can support the Time-Bound Programme activities; and
- a national campaign to both raise awareness on the devastating effects of the worst forms of child labour on children and society and mobilize the social actors to participate in the Time-Bound Programme.

It must be noted, however, that the earthquakes of early 2001 have changed the immediate priorities of a number of IPEC's national government and civil society partners and, thus, some of the TBP preparatory activities planned for the coming months have been temporarily suspended or delayed.